

HOW EXCEPTIONAL ARE THE DUTCH?
IDENTIFYING GENERAL AND COUNTRY SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS OF
GOVERNANCE IN MULTI-LAYERED POLYCENTRIC EDUCATION SYSTEMS

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1 Introduction

The question of how to effectively govern our complex societies is one of the great questions of our age. In the past three decades, power has moved away from central governments: upwards, towards international organisations, sideways to private and public actors and downwards towards social enterprises such as schools (Theisens, Hooge & Waslander, 2016). Where once we had central government, we now have governance; which can be defined as the processes of establishing priorities, formulating and implementing policies and being accountable in complex networks with many different actors (Pierre & Peters, 2005). These shifts in power are a consequence of fundamental social changes that make our societies increasingly complex. Trends like globalisation, individualisation and rapid technological change have increased the diversity and speed of changes and added to the unpredictability in modern societies (Theisens, 2012; OECD, 2013). This is also true in education, where in response to increasing complex societies almost all high-income countries have decentralised power to local governments and schools, with the understanding that local governments and schools have a better understanding of local problems and priorities (Burns & Koster, 2016). This has created a system that is much more complex to govern, while at the same time the demands on the education system to contribute to solving social problems (inequality, the integration of migrants, improving public health, etc.) has only increased.

In this paper, part of the work from a two-year research programme into complex steering networks in education systems is presented. The main aim of this programme was to empirically unravel the way in which steering emerges in complex networks, tracing how steering emerges in national level policy networks and finds its way into the classroom. The research was carried out by a research team of six people from three research institutions and funded by the Dutch Science Council. The results of this project are presented at a symposium at AERA discussing four papers in total. The first paper (Hooge, Theisens & Waslander, 2017) puts the focus on the theoretical framework of the programme. Papers 3 and 4 provide empirical results for the Netherlands, both for steering dynamics at the national level (Hooge, et al., 2017) and within boards of secondary education (Waslander et al., 2017).

This present, second paper focuses on the findings of the international case study that was also part of the research programme. The objective of this international comparative study

was to compare the steering dynamics between actors involved in Dutch education policy with steering dynamics in similar multi-layered polycentric education systems. In that way we aimed to find out whether the characteristics and steering dynamics are typically Dutch or represent more general features of complex and decentralised education systems.

The paper first presents a brief theoretical background: the rise of New Public Governance and the importance of understanding steering in that context. The paper then presents the findings with regard to steering in the Netherlands and compares this with three other systems: Finland, Flanders and Ontario. Based on this comparison the paper draws conclusions and reflects on possible implications for (Dutch) steering in education.

2 The rise of New Public Governance

Understanding how we can effectively govern complex decentralised systems is difficult. The credibility of strong steering by central governments (traditional public administration) has been undermined by decades of research showing that good intentions and rational planning by central governments are not sufficient to solve social problems. The most important alternative perspective, that central governments are part of the problem, not the solution, and that markets are in fact a much more effective way of governance, is also largely discredited. New Public Management has sought to introduce market mechanisms by a host of different policies: privatisation, tax reduction, decentralisation, performance measurement, output steering. But from the nineties onwards there has been an increasing debate: these measures do not solve all problems, they do not respect the special nature of public governance and they have often created more fragmentation and complexity (Aucoin, 1990, Sing, 2003). From the turn of the century onwards this academic debate has affected governance.

A new perspective has risen: New Public Governance, picturing steering is pluricentric, interactive and often horizontal. NPG deals with complexity by allowing for self-organisation: vertically organised societies based on hierarchical power make way for horizontal forms of organising society with multiple centres of power, i.e. through networks (Thompson et al, 1991; Hufen & Ringeling, 1990). Plurality is a key concept in NPG, where multiple

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interconnected actors contribute to the delivery of public services such as education. NPG focuses very much on relationships and interaction between different actors and upon how the policy-making system is informed by multiple processes (Osborne, 2010; Kooiman, 2003; Zehavi, 2012; Rhodes, 2007). Self-organisation means there must be sufficient autonomy at different levels of the system to organise locally and develop local solutions within a wider framework of rules. Networks operate on the basis of links between different actors and are in tune with the growing interdependence of society. Networks are more flexible than the traditional hierarchical organization of the state and therefore fit the dynamics of ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman, 2000). Networks operate on the basis of trust. They function because people are willing to co-operate and sacrifice short-term gains for the benefit of long term benefits. They are very different in this sense from markets and hierarchies, where the need for trust is minimised through complex systems of incentives and rules (Cerna, 2014). This is not just a nice conceptual thought: Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom has shown through decades of empirical research that in the absence of strong central control and powerful market forces, local networks can, under the right conditions (e.g. the absence of an overbearing state or very large inequalities) effectively solve shared problems, like maintaining complex irrigation works (Ostrom, 2010).

In the era of NPG, a crucial question for governments is how to relate to these networks and how to perform the act of steering with or through networks. At least two new forms of steering emerge in the era of NPG (Politt & Bouckaert, 2011; Osborne, 2010; Pierre & Peters 2005)

- 1 Meta steering: where government is steering *through networks*. This involves creating the arena within which networks of public and private parties operate: establishing frameworks, formulating a strategic vision, facilitating knowledge and feedback and operating as a crowbar when participants in a network arrive at a stalemate (Pierre & Peters, 2005).
- 2 Network steering: where government is an *actor in the network*. At the edges of the government, where ministries, civil society organisations, private companies and citizens

come together there are dynamic networks that address social problems (Pierre & Peters, 2005).

Central governments play several roles and steers in several ways according to this governance concept. While some argue that the role of the state has weakened or even hollowed out (Rhodes, 2007), it is also argued that the state still plays a dominant role in governing the public domain, be it less powerful and omnipotent (Pierre & Peters, 2005). From the perspective of New Public Governance, effective governance requires both strong networks and a strong government. Steering through networks increases the effectiveness and legitimacy of government steering by shifting from formal legal instruments to more flexible forms of steering, and by involving decentral organisations and actors in implementation (Politt & Bouckaert, 2011).

Although there is a growing body of literature on the New Public Governance phenomenon, there is little understanding of how networks, horizontal steering and interaction produce governance. Much of the literature is conceptual and normative and there is a real need for a more empirical approach.²

3 Comparing steering in the Netherlands with Finland, Flanders and Ontario

This paper focuses on one significant empirical finding of the Dutch study: the agile and flexible nature of the networks in which steering education arises (Hooge et al, 2017). The paper will compare this finding of the Dutch study to steering education in other countries that are in many respects comparable to the Netherlands. A comparative study was performed of three other education system comparable to the Netherlands: Finland, Flanders and Ontario.³ These systems are like the Netherlands small and decentralised, with large amounts of autonomy for schools (OECD, 2017). They also perform at comparative levels in

² For a more elaborate description of these theoretical developments see Theisens et al, 2016.

³ The case descriptions for Finland, Flanders and Ontario are based on a working paper that was commissioned as part of this project: Frankowski & Schulz, 2016.

international studies of student performance (OECD, 2016b). Whereas the Dutch case study is based on extensive empirical work, the comparative studies in the other countries are much more limited. They are first and foremost a check on whether these agile and flexible steering networks are typically Dutch or whether they can be found in all kinds of comparable education systems.

The paper describes the findings in the different systems focussing on the position of the ministry an schools, the shape of the steering network, the patterns of steering and the patterns of (the resulting) change in the system.

3.1 The Netherlands

Ministry

In the Netherlands, the provision of education is free and education laws and regulations must always respect the freedom of providers, particularly with regard to the choice of learning materials and the hiring of teachers. Central government can control the education system by setting standards, attainment targets and examinations (Nusche et al., 2014). All schools are expected to provide adequate education. To ensure that this is the case, all schools are under the scrutiny of the Dutch Inspectorate of Education.

Schools

All schools are under the auspices of school boards which are structured in private legal forms. Since they are appointed, Dutch school board members function as trustees rather than as representatives. This means that school boards lack democratic accountability mechanisms and operate at a relative distance from (the dynamics of) government (OECD, 2016a; Hooge & Honing, 2014).

Steering Network

A notable development in the Dutch education system in the last two decades, is the growing number of organisations and institutions that operate between the level of school boards and that of national government (Hooge, 2013). A great diversity of organisation forms exists, such as independent administrative bodies with policy responsibilities or administrative tasks in education, regional administrative authorities, municipalities, councils and sector organisations (representing employers in education), trade unions (representing employees in

education), (associations of) occupational groups in education, consultancy and support organisations, process and project management organisations, platforms, think tanks and knowledge centres. The parties at this intermediate administrative level engage in policymaking and steering in the education field to varying degrees, resulting in a great deal of activity and influence that affect school boards' autonomy and discretion (Waslander et al, 2016). This was reflected in the finding in the Dutch study where networks for two sectors (secondary and vocational education) and for three policy themes were charted (minimum levels mathematics and reading, citizenship formation and learning organisations) resulting in six separate networks.⁴ With respect to the policy networks in which education policy and steering initiatives are being created, the following results are remarkable:

- First, in the Netherlands there are many actors involved in making policies. In all six networks 10 to 15 relevant actors were strongly interconnected with additional actors playing a more marginal role.
- Second, these six networks were all very different in terms of the actors participating in the networks and the way in which these actors interacted.
- Third, notwithstanding these differences, the Ministry of Education played a role as a central network “conductor” in all these networks.

In other words, in the Netherlands there are different steering networks for every combination of sector and policy issue, but in all these networks the ministry plays a central role. Table 1 illustrates this, comparing steering networks in secondary education for two policy issues.

⁴ In these four papers/ this AERA sessions we only discuss the secondary education cases of our study. Here we refer to the vocational sector only to make the point of the diversity of steering networks across sectors and policy themes.

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Table 1: Dutch steering networks in education

	Minimum levels mathematics and reading	Civic education
<i>Relevant actors</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thirteen actors, strongly interconnected: • Programme management on School Development, Education Council and Teacher24 in a more marginal position 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ten actors, strongly interconnected • Education Council and Schools Advisory Services in a more marginal position
<i>Conductor</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministry of Education and to a lesser extent the Council for Secondary Education (VO Raad) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central government: Ministry of Education, Cabinet with the Integration Agenda, Ministry of Security and Justice, en Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, and to a lesser extent the Education Inspectorate
<i>Central position</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Centre for Tests and Examinations (CvTE) and Support Office on Raising Standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Institute for Curriculum Development and the Civic Education Alliance

Steering patterns

Within this diversity of steering networks the ministry as well as the other actors deploy a variety of steering mechanisms to create and influence policy making.

- Normalisation: shaping the way in which policy themes are being valued and interpreted and by showing “exemplary” behaviour.
- Responsibilisation: making certain actors responsible for certain aspects of steering in a particular policy issue; distributing roles within the steering networks
- Instrumentalisation: all possible forms of written and oral communication and support, ranging from very open forms of communication like information leaflets for schools and presenting research results, to stronger forms of steering such as developing and

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measuring indicators and formats that must be used by schools to monitor and report progress.

Within this diversity of networks, actors and steering interventions the Dutch Ministry of Education proves an agile and flexible operator. The ministry adapts its steering interventions to the policy issue in question and the steering network at hand. Steering by the ministry can be direct, indirect or by shaping the steering network itself.

- Direct steering: the ministry enters into a direct steering relationship with schools. Other actors in the steering network are influencing this steering relationship or are co-steering with the ministry.
- Indirect steering: the ministry steers through the steering network of different actors at the intermediary level. For example when the ministry closes “contracts” with unions and organisations representing schools .
- Steering through shaping the steering networks: the ministry does not just use existing networks but also creates new actors, enters into new relations with existing actors or strengthens the position of existing actors.

Patterns of change

On the one hand this steering dynamic creates many avenues for actors to influence the policy process. The openness of the system, with different networks for different issues and different education sectors allows for many actors to have a say. On the other hand, this system allows the ministry to steer much more actively than would be expected in a situation in which networks and creating consensus within networks are necessary. The flexibility of the Dutch steering networks allows the Ministry of Education to pick and mix network actors and types of steering. It allows the ministry, especially in situation of political pressure to rapidly create policies and impact schools directly. This pattern is strengthened by the fact that there are almost no actors at the intermediate level between school boards and ministry that are fully independent of the Ministry of Education. Almost all actors receive support from the ministry in some form or other: direct or indirect financial support, access to network meetings and to the ministry itself, verbal support by the ministry (and the minister) that provides status for a

network actor. For many network actors, the withdrawal of these kinds of support would be extremely problematic. At the same time, these network actors are not merely puppets on a string, they have a certain autonomy and are using this to shape steering and exercise control.

3.2 Finland

Ministry

The Finnish educational system at first glance looks quite centralized, since there are extensive national policies for education, of which the most important one is presented in the form of a National core curriculum, a very elaborate document in which general objectives of education are formulated. The core curriculum is quite directive and prescriptive. For example, it consists of elaborate descriptions of which grade (between 4-10) should be attributed to students, in accordance with a certain level of competence. The core curriculum is really the vehicle the ministry of education deploys to steer what is going on inside Finnish schools

Schools

This centralised appearance is misleading. While the national curriculum prescribes the basic objectives of education, how schools go about achieving the goals of the curriculum is the responsibility of schools themselves. Schools have high degrees of autonomy, in this regard. They develop their own local curricula and local authorities formulate local policies for education. Decentralization can also be seen in the extent and amount of responsibility that is attributed to teachers in classrooms. They have the freedom to choose learning and teaching tools and methods and they are responsible for the quality of education. A lot of attention is focused on the creation of professional communities in schools in Finland. By means of self-evaluations and peer assessments, the professional culture within schools is developed extensively.

Steering network

In the development of the core curriculum, stakeholder involvement – of decentralized actors – is very important. The national curriculum is the result of an extensive process in which all relevant actors are actively invited to contribute ideas during the draw up of the document. One of the principles of the core curriculum is that everyone who wants to contribute to it, is welcome and invited to do so. The core curriculum is developed together with all stakeholders

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in education. The idea behind the extensive and comprehensive dialogue that the Finnish National Board of Education – an autonomous agency - organizes and initiates, is that this will not only include all the actors involved in education, but will also create a sense of ownership and support for the educational policy. Stakeholders participate and contribute just as much to steering as government does (Frankowski & Schulz, in print).

Steering patterns

The Finnish government mainly steers through information, support and funding rather than through rules, regulations and control by school inspections. Finland does not have a school inspectorate – it was abolished in the early 1990s. Schools are rather trusted to ensure high quality of education in other ways. For example, there is a big emphasis on self-evaluations. The ministry provides schools with information, tools and guidelines to conduct these evaluations. This practice coincides with the decentralized responsibilities within the system. National government only takes sample based tests to measure the educational level and addresses the results of the system. There are both self-evaluations of schools and national evaluations of learning outcomes. National evaluations of learning outcomes are done regularly (tests every year either in mother tongue and literature or mathematics) and sample-based. Other subjects are evaluated according to an evaluation plan of the Ministry of Education and Culture. The Finnish system thus evolves around an elaborate system of self-evaluations. The outcomes of the evaluations are not used to assess individual schools however, they are not an alternative to school inspections. Rather, the results are used internally, by schools themselves. Gathered information about schools – for example from the sample based tests that are conducted - are only used at an aggregate level, to improve the whole educational system, rather than to evaluate the performance of individual schools.

Patterns of change

Since the National core curriculum is altered only once every ten years, the system enjoys relative stability or steadiness. In addition, the national curriculum is limited to the goals and objectives for all the general courses, but does not interfere with courses that form part of the local curricula, on which local authorities can decide.

3.3. Flanders

Ministry

Education in the Flemish Community is characterized by high degrees of autonomy, at different levels. The Flemish Ministry of Education and Training sets a core curriculum with specified minimum attainment targets and developmental objectives (Nusche et al., 2015).

School

Apart from that, the Flemish education system is highly decentralized in many respects. First, it is characterized by high degrees of autonomy at the level of schools. Second, there is a constitutionally embedded principle of freedom of education, that provides every person in Belgium with the right to establish schools, organized and orientated towards denominational, non-denominational or pedagogical criteria (Shewbridge et al., 2011), resulting in a multitude of available school types in the country. In addition, parents have a free choice in and guaranteed access to a school for their children, although this cannot be ensured in all cases, due to capacity problems of the schools (Rouw et al., 2016).

Steering network

The most influential parties in the Belgian education system are the educational network organizations to which different school boards belong. They are the *central* actors within the Flemish educational system. Even though the Flemish system is highly decentralized, school boards do not have much influence. In theory, they can design their own curricula, but in practice, this is done by network organizations that function as umbrella organizations for school boards. These organizations design the curricula according to their beliefs and preferences. School boards follow the prescribed curriculum plans of the network organizations to a large extent. In addition, the Inspectorate develops its supervisory framework based on the attainment targets the network organizations decide on. Apart from the individual ties with the Ministry of Education and Training, they are represented in the VLOR as well, a council consisting of all major stakeholders in the Belgian education system. This council must be consulted before any decisions regarding education can be made by the Flemish government. On top of that, the council has the right to advice on their own initiative, resulting in an even bigger influence of the educational network organizations. Not only the network organizations are well organized and highly influential in Flanders, other representing associations are as well. There are different student and parental organizations

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active in the system and all of them are represented in the VLOR as well. In addition, there is an elaborate structure of student councils in place.

Steering patterns

The Flemish government only ‘steers’ through a limited set of attainment targets. These form the basic framework for education. The Inspectorate checks for adherence to these attainment targets, once every ten years. A larger amount and more specific targets are formulated by the network organizations. The Inspectorate checks for these attainment targets as well. The only testing that is being done is the National Assessment Program, in which a sample of schools is checked periodically. The most important ‘steering mechanisms’ the Flemish government uses are financial. The government is the main funder of schools, including privately run ones, and of many of the actors in the educational system. Many representative associations receive public funding by government. The Ministry of Education and Training also steers through information: it informs schools directly about developments in education, through the Ministry’s publication ‘Klasse’: a magazine that is freely distributed to all schools and teachers. Despite the formal and neutral character of the magazine, it plays a major role in contributing to the organization of the public debate on education in Flanders enabling the ministry to communicate directly to teachers and school teams (Struyve et al., 2014).

Patterns of change

The high degree of decentralization within the Flemish system, has implications for education policies. Schools are not easily reached by government, which makes it harder to make changes or adjustments to the system. The implementation of new policies takes a long time and is very difficult – if not impossible – without the cooperation of the educational network organizations. In that sense, the system lacks flexibility. The right that allows everyone in Belgium to start a school, has resulted in great diversity between schools. This factor limits the possibilities for centrally steering the system, in the sense that centrally formulated policies must allow for great diversity. Central steering can therefore only occupy itself with very broad policies and needs to allow for a broad bandwidth within those policies so that schools can translate these policies in specific activities in way that fits their particular context.

3.4. Ontario

Ministry

Ontario can be characterized by a strong central government with a strategic vision about education. A highly politicized educational field in combination with strong leadership of political parties, resulted in an ongoing process of centralization of the system.

Schools

The process of attributing more power to the central government, has resulted in less decision-making power for school boards at the local district level. The district level school boards consist of locally and directly elected trustees.

Steering network

Educational policies are formulated after deliberations with all major stakeholders in the educational field however, until consensus about policies is reached. There are different structures in place, that support and organize a dialogue between policy makers and other parties in the educational system. For example, an Education Partnership Table was created in 2004, a practical forum designed to get broad and diverse input from the education sector. Participants include groups and associations representing students, parents, trustees, directors of education, supervisory officers, teachers, support workers and principals. In 2008, the Ontario Ministry of Education also established a Governance Review Committee, consisting of trustees, members of trustees' associations and directors of school boards, which acts as another structure for stakeholder consultation.

Steering patterns

The Ontario Ministry of Education is the central actor in the education system, responsible for funding and regulations. It develops all kinds of policies, for example regarding equity, safety in schools, capital requirements and buildings. It is also responsible for developing educational policies, setting performance standards and monitoring the performance and compliance of schools to formulated goals and objectives. The provincial ministry develops the Ontario Curriculum, containing learning objectives and outlining the requirements for obtaining the Ontario secondary school diploma. There is a strong focus on accountability in Ontario. Even though there is no central exam in place – which does not allow for the collection of information on quantitative performance indicators –, nor an inspectorate or

school inspections, there is a strong focus on the financial performance of schools. School boards receive certain levels of autonomy to make their own decisions, but in return, they are held accountable. The government has far stretching powers to exercise control and to even overtake school boards in case of underperformance. However, these extreme powers are only used if schools are financially underperforming. This rather top down approach to steering is combined with a more consultative approach with regard to implementation of policies, with important roles for the Education Partnership Table and the Governance Review Committee.

Patterns of change

The Ontario two-party system allows political parties with an absolute majority to translate their political ideas in concrete education policies in a relatively top down fashion. This creates potential discontinuities in education policies after elections. However, it also increases the likelihood of more coherent policies for the period that one political party rules.

4 Conclusions

4.1 Main findings

In all four education systems studied here, networks of different actors are involved in steering education. Table 2 summaries the empirical findings and shows that all networks consist of actors such as representative organisations of schools, interest groups, advisory councils, knowledge institutions, local governments and school boards. In all four education systems, the ministry is a central actor. Ministries have the formal responsibility for the education system, they have legal powers, they control funding, they are the largest organisations and they have a knowledge advantage. At the same time, the power of ministries is limited in the highly decentralised education systems.

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Table 2 summary of empirical findings

	<i>Netherlands</i>	<i>Finland</i>	<i>Flanders</i>	<i>Ontario</i>
Political system	Multiparty system with coalition governments	Multiparty system with coalition governments	Multiparty system with coalition governments	Two-party system with one party governments
steering networks	Very autonomous school boards and a national ministry with few formal, but many informal players in between.	Very autonomous schools/ local communities, with national power divided between Finish National Board for Education and the Ministry	Very autonomous school boards. In between these schools and the Flemish ministry, the network organisations play an important role at the “national” level	Very autonomous local educational authorities. Strong role for the dominant political party to shape policy at the national level
Steering patterns	Steering through agile and flexible networks	Very open process during the creation of the national curriculum, after that stability	Formal and institutionalised consultation and co-creation of policy with the network organisations	Policy formation is centralised but implementation in dialogue between local educational authorities and ministry
Patterns of change	A combination of consensus based steering in individual network, with the possibility for rapid steering interventions because of flexible networks	High stability because of the formal process of the national curriculum and the use of this curriculum for relatively long periods	High stability because of the investments in time and energy in finding consensus between ministry and the network organisations	Stability that is very much linked to the political party in power. Political change can lead to different policies unrelated to what happens in the education system

But crucially there are also important differences between the systems (see for an overview Table 2). A first difference is in the nature of these steering networks. Compared to the steering networks in the other systems, the Dutch networks are more agile and flexible, less institutionalised with many networks that are specific for one policy issue or education sector. Dutch networks are characterised by many actors that are solely engaged in one or two specific networks or that have been established for one particular policy issue. Flanders has a complex network as well, but these networks are dominated by the very powerful network organisations that are involved in almost all steering. The Finnish network lacks these dominant actors, but in Finland the centrally organised process of coming to a national curriculum structures the steering process. Relatively long periods of relative stability are interspersed with shorter periods in which the national curriculum is under intense discussion

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by all actors in the system. In Ontario, the complexity of the networks is reduced because the ministry is so dominant in the formation of policy. The influence of complex networks starts only with the implementation of centrally determined plans

As discussed, the unstructured nature of the Dutch networks provides the ministry with the opportunity for agile and flexible network steering. In Flanders, the ministry always needs to work together with the network organisations who are crucial both for shaping and implementing policies. In Finland, there is one dominant process through which the ministry steers education: the national curriculum. That precludes the possibility to respond to political pressure to steer on all kinds of different themes through different networks. In Ontario, policy formation is more centralised which means that the ministry is more dominant in the stage of policy formation. On the other hand, the ministry lacks the mechanism to create legitimacy for policies in this stage, which is what the Dutch ministry does.

These differences in networks and steering have consequences for the patterns of change. Although the Netherlands is characterised by seeking consensus in networks, the stability that could be a result of this process is undermined by agile and flexible networks. This agility makes it possible to choose different networks and actors (“coalitions of the willing”) to accomplish steering arrangements in response to political and social pressure. This is different in Finland, where dialogue about the national curriculum once every ten years provides stability. In Flanders stability is the result of the very strong and institutionally entrenched position of the network organisations. Reaching consensus under these circumstances is a costly process in terms of time and energy. Once consensus is reached, all parties have a vested interest in respecting the consensus for a while. Stability in Ontario comes from the central and very political position of the ministry and the minister. In a two-party system like Ontario at least for a period of four years (and quite often longer) one ideology dominates policy making. Of course, that leads to a different form of instability. When parties are voted out of power, education policies can change for reasons wholly unrelated to education.

4.2 Reflections

One of the findings of the Dutch study was that agile and flexible steering networks create many uncoordinated steering interventions (Hooge et al., 2017). This has consequences for schools (Waslander et al., 2017). Steering *inside* school boards is also characterised by many actors – like teachers, team managers, principals and school boards – working together. Inside schools, activities need to be coordinated to create coherent educational programmes and organisations. The way in which this coordination problem is solved relies heavily on organisation routines. Stable patterns that coordinate the activities of different people and that create alignment within the organisation. Examples of these routines are annual planning and control cycles, budgeting procedures at different levels of the organization, individual performance and planning meetings and closer to the learning process itself the curriculum and annual exams. Steering in education is only successful if it changes one or more of these routines. But changing – often deeply ingrained – routines is not easy, it requires time and energy. Apart from developing a new routine and abolishing an old one, the new routine must be coherent with the rest of the organisation (Feldman & Pentland, 2013; Parmigiani & Howard-Grenville, 2011; Spillane, Parise & Sherer, 2011; Tubin, 2015).

The contrast between agile networks at the national level and educational practice structured by routines, creates problems at the level of the school. Within schools the many, diverse and uncoordinated steering interventions that come from different steering networks, must come together and be translated in organisational routines to be effective. This creates a steering overload at the level of schools, where school management and teachers simply cannot digest the number of steering interventions. The study found that many schools ignored steering interventions by government if they (thought they) could get away with it. If not, they first tried to incorporate the steering incentives into existing routines and only if this proved impossible would they change routines or create new routines.

From an international comparative perspective, an interesting question then is whether this situation is inherent to the Dutch model and whether other systems have developed better interfaces between steering networks and schools that may reduce the problems of steering overload. The national curriculum in Finland, the institutionalised position of the network organisations in Flanders and the central position of the ministry in Ontario structure steering,

reducing the number of steering interventions and improving coordination between steering interventions.

The international comparison raises several questions: Is the capacity that is available in the Dutch system used well, or is capacity and therefore effectiveness lost due to lack of coordination and unmanageable overload? To what extent does the fragmented nature of steering in the Dutch systems hamper capacity building of the Dutch education system as a whole? And finally and importantly for policy makers: is it possible to design a dominant routine for steering in the Dutch education system that allows for more effective steering?

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